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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001781

C O R R E C T E D COPY (TEXT THROUGHOUT)

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: TASHNAQ STILL SNUBBED BY HARIRI

REF: BEIRUT 1722

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Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) With visiting NEA DAS David Hale, Armenian Tashnaq SYG Hovig Mekhitarian noted his satisfaction with the new electoral law, laid out in the Doha agreement, because it allows the Armenians to vote for Armenian deputies (and not have their votes diluted by pro-March 14 Sunni voters), and it guarantees that one Armenian candidate will be from Tashnaq. Remarking that he hoped Tashnaq would resume its tradition of allying with the president, Mekhitarian said that Tashnaq's support for independent MP Michel Murr was firm. He added that while Tashnaq is "not March 8," it could not support March 14 because of its lack of a relationship with majority leader Saad Hariri. Mekhitarian also said that he hoped for a united Armenian community, noting that the three Armenian parties (the other two being allied with Hariri's Future Movement) meet regularly. End summary.

NEW ELECTORAL LAW  
BENEFITS TASHNAQ  
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12. (C) Visiting NEA DAS David Hale and the Ambassador, accompanied by NEA/ELA Lebanon Desk Officer Matt Irwin and PolOff, met the Armenian Tashnaq SYG Hovig Mekhitarian, Tashnaq MP Hagop Pakradonian, and a third Tashnaq member at their headquarters in Bourj Hammoud on December 19. Hale stressed that the spring 2009 parliamentary elections are of critical importance, and that the U.S. wants to see a free and transparent electoral process.

13. (C) Agreeing, Mekhitarian expressed his desire that the elections occur on time. He noted his deep satisfaction with Interior Minister Ziad Baroud. Mekhitarian explained that the changes to the electoral law, agreed upon in Doha, benefit Tashnaq by allocating one Armenian seat to the opposition (Tashnaq) and one for the March 14 alliance for the Beirut second district. (Note: Previously, the Armenian

seats in Beirut were part of Saad Hariri's Future Movement, because, under the previous districting system, the Beirut districts were primarily composed of Sunnis who voted for the Armenian deputies allied with Future, therein diluting the Armenian votes. With the new districting, there is an almost equal representation of Armenian, Shia, and Christian voters. End note.)

TASHNAQ TO ALLY WITH THE PRESIDENT  
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¶4. (C) Criticizing the 2000 electoral law for disadvantaging the Armenians, Mekhitarian said Tashnaq's goal is to establish an independent Armenian bloc. He noted that his party is traditionally allied with the president, stressing that this means the institution, rather than the individual. Mekhitarian expressed his hope that Tashnaq once again would ally with the president.

TASHNAQ "NOT MARCH 8,"  
BUT CANNOT SUPPORT MARCH 14  
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¶5. (C) Hale said that the U.S. supports the president and Lebanon's institutions, including the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces, and that the U.S. would like to see those who support Lebanon's institutions prevail in the elections. Stating that Tashnaq's biggest problem with March 14 is its lack of a relationship with Saad Hariri, Mekhitarian insisted that Tashnaq could not ally with March 14 as long as this tension persisted.

¶6. (C) "We are not March 8, but we were obliged to ally with the opposition," he declared. He pointed out that Tashnaq does not always agree with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, and gave an example of when Tashnaq refused to participate in a 2006 strike called by Aoun. According to

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Mekhitarian, Aoun was becoming increasingly flexible, and has dropped his presidential aspirations.

¶7. (C) Remarking that Tashnaq had had an understanding with Saad Hariri's father, the late PM Rafiq Hariri, Mekhitarian said that everything changed after he was assassinated. Saad has since refused to meet indirectly or directly with Tashnaq, despite multiple Tashnaq attempts to seek such a meeting, Mekhitarian said. He affirmed that Tashnaq has a good relationship with independent MP Michel Murr.

ARMENIAN PARTIES  
MEET REGULARLY  
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¶8. (C) Assessing that the Armenian community in Lebanon is faring relatively well despite the economic downturn, Mekhitarian said that the Armenians strive to remain as one community. He noted that Tashnaq meets every month with the other two Armenian political parties in Lebanon, both of which are allied with Future Movement and represent 15 percent of the Armenian community.

COMMENT  
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¶9. (C) Mekhitarian appeared less flexible regarding Tashnaq's electoral alliances than we witnessed in a meeting Pakradonian earlier in the month (reftel). While Pakradonian indicated that Tashnaq was still "available for courting," Mekhitarian demonstrated bitterness towards Hariri. It is possible he was posturing, with the hope that Hale and the Ambassador would urge Hariri to meet with Tashnaq, or he could carry a more hardline stance than Pakradonian. Nevertheless, other sources suggest that Tashnaq is not immovable. End comment.

110. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

SISON